

“In Christ We Have Hope” (1 Corinthians 15)

April 21, 2019

Brian Watson

On a weekend in April, millions of people around the world will gather together in congregations to consider a story. It’s the story of how evil, an enemy, death itself, will be defeated by good in an unlikely way. It’s a story that has captivated millions, a story that has led millions to pour out their passion, their time, and their money. I’m not talking about Easter and the resurrection of Jesus Christ; I’m talking about *Avengers: End Game*. Yes, the latest Marvel superhero movie is opening next weekend, and it is expected to take in about \$300 million in the United States in that first weekend alone.

In case you’ve been living in a cave in Afghanistan, the Avengers are the Marvel Comics superheroes, including Captain America, Iron Man, Thor, and the Hulk. Spider-Man has also joined the group. And in the last *Avengers* movie, which was released a year ago, the Avengers were up against the most powerful enemy they’ve faced, an otherworldly villain named Thanos. *Thanos* is the Greek word for death, which is fitting, because Thanos wanted to kill a lot of people in the universe. I don’t want to spoil too much of the movie in case you’ve missed it. Suffice it to say, Thanos succeeded in killing a lot of people, including some people whom the Avengers love. In this new movie, they will try to reverse the effects of death and even destroy the enemy named death.

Now, it may be silly to reference action movies on a day like this, but these movies are extremely popular. The last Avengers movie, *Avengers: Infinity War*, made \$2 billion worldwide. That’s the fourth highest-grossing movie of all time (if you don’t adjust for inflation). The first Avengers movie made \$1.5 billion and the second made \$1.4 billion. *Black Panther*, another movie in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, made \$1.36 billion. Three other Marvel movies have made over \$1 billion worldwide. So, people do pour out their money to watch these movies. And they pour out their time. I saw on Facebook a meme that suggested that fans should watch all of the twenty-one Marvel movies in their chronological order (according to time line) to gear up to watch this next movie. That would take over forty hours! And I’m sure there are more than a few people who are doing that.

It’s amazing that millions of people will spend all that time and money to watch fictional tales of superheroes defeating evil—and hopefully defeating death—and yet most people will not

take the time and effort to consider what, if anything, they can do in the face of the real enemy, the real death that awaits us all. Is there any hope of life after death? Can we really rest in peace? If so, do we all rest in peace, or only some of us? How can we know such things?

I find that most people don't spend much time asking these types of questions. They don't think about why we're here, where we've come from, and what the meaning of life is. Most people have some idea about what is wrong with the world, but I don't think many people have correctly identified the root cause of evil. And few people seem to look ahead and think carefully about death and what comes after. Yet anyone with a well-thought-out worldview should think about these questions and should have answers that are coherent and true.

This morning, we're going to hear about some of the most important parts of the Christian worldview. We're going to consider what the Bible says is good news, and we're going to think about the core events of that message. We're going to look at some of 1 Corinthians, a letter that the apostle Paul wrote to Christians in the Greek city of Corinth in the year 54 or 55, a little over twenty years after Jesus died and rose from the grave. Specifically, we're going to look at parts of chapter 15.

We'll begin by looking at the first two verses:

¹ Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, ² and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.¹

Paul wants to remind his readers of the gospel, which means “good news.” It's the central message of Christianity. It's a word that's found in the book of Isaiah, from the Old Testament (Isa. 40:9; 41:27; 52:7; 61:1). Roughly seven hundred years before Jesus came to the world, God promised that he would comfort his people, that he would provide a way for them to be forgiven of their sin, and that he would even remake the world into a paradise, where there is no more evil and death. The problem with our world is that we sin, which is a rebellion against God, a failure to love him and obey him. God made us to love him with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. He made us to live under his rule, which is good because God is a good King and a loving Father. He made us to worship him and obey him, and to relate to him as children. He made us to love one another. The problem is that we don't do those things, certainly not perfectly. And as a result, our sin separates us from God (Isa. 59:2). Because of sin, the first human beings were

¹ All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

kicked out of a garden paradise and put into a wilderness where there is evil, fighting, wars, diseases, and death. All the bad things we experience in this world can be traced to our sin—the sin of the first human beings and our own sins. That’s the bad news. But the good news is that God has provided everything we need to be reconciled to him, to have that separation between him and us eliminated. And he has promised that one day in the future, he will restore the world so that it once again is a paradise, where God and his people dwell in peace, harmony, and happiness.

Paul says that it is by this gospel message that people are being saved—if they hold fast to it. Salvation isn’t a one-time experience. It is an ongoing experience, an ongoing relationship with Jesus. If you don’t have a deep, abiding faith that has changed your life, you really haven’t believed in Jesus.

Now let’s look at the content of the gospel. Let’s read verses 3–8:

³ For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. ⁶ Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. ⁸ Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

Here is the heart of the Christian message: “Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures” and “he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.” The Bible states that Jesus died on a cross, an instrument of torture, shame, and death reserved for enemies of the Roman Empire, and that he died while Pontius Pilate was governor. This squares with all the early historical knowledge of Jesus that we have outside of the Bible. But only the Bible, God’s written word, tells us why he died—to take the penalty for our sins that we deserve. Though Jesus is the only perfect person who has lived, though he never sinned, he died because our sin deserves the death penalty. He also rose from the grave on the third day, to show that he paid for the sins of his people in full, to demonstrate that he has power over sin and death, and to show what will happen to all who trust in him—they, too, will rise from the dead in bodies that are immortal and imperishable. All of this was in line with Old Testament prophecy. (Jesus’

death was prophesied in Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53, particularly Isa. 53:5, 12. His resurrection was prophesied in Ps. 16:10; Isa. 53:10–12.²) In short, God promised this would happen, and it did.

Not only that, it was witnessed by hundreds of people. Paul here is probably quoting some early type of creedal statement about Jesus' death and resurrection. The parallel clauses that begin with "that" indicate it was structured in a way that made it easy to be memorized and recited. The language of "delivering" and "receiving" suggests this was a statement that he received from the apostles within the first few years after Jesus died and rose from the grave. And that's important, because that means that this was the message about Jesus from the beginning. This isn't some myth that was created many years after Jesus lived.

Also, Paul is writing an open letter to people in a very cosmopolitan city. If Jesus didn't actually die on the cross and rise up from the grave, and if all these people didn't see him, someone could easily refute Paul. In fact, Paul would have to be the boldest liar to say such things if they weren't true. If there were people who knew that Jesus didn't die on the cross, or that he was killed and his corpse was still in a tomb, they would have challenged Paul. But we don't have any documents from the first century that contradict the Christian message. Paul is stating that these key events of Christianity are not just religious beliefs—these are historical facts, and hundreds of people could bear witness to these facts, though some of the witnesses had already died. ("Fallen asleep" is a euphemism for "died.")

Paul is stating in the strongest way that Jesus' resurrection is true. He goes on to say that if it's not true, Christianity is false. Let's skip ahead to read verses 12–19:

¹² Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? ¹³ But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. ¹⁴ And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. ¹⁵ We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. ¹⁶ For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. ¹⁷ And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. ¹⁸ Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. ¹⁹ If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.

² "New Testament writers may have seen a pattern in God delivering or manifesting himself to his people on the third day (cf. Gen. 22:4; Exod. 19:11, 15, 16; Josh. 1:11; Judg. 20:30; Hos. 6:2; Jon. 1:17)." Thomas R. Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018), 303.

Here's what Paul is saying: Consider what would be the case if Jesus *didn't* rise from the dead. If there's no resurrection of Jesus, Paul says, our preaching and your faith is in vain. It's all a lie. It means that we've been misrepresenting God, which is a great sin. And it means that we're all still in our sins. If Jesus didn't rise from the grave, there's no salvation, there's no future resurrection for Christians. If Jesus didn't rise from the grave, Christianity's all a sham. If Jesus didn't rise from the dead, Christians are fools, because they give up so much to follow someone who clearly wasn't the Messiah and the Son of God.

Paul was saying that because apparently some people didn't believe in the resurrection. The idea that a dead man could come back to life in a body that can never die again was just as unbelievable then as it is now. People in the Greco-Roman world who believed in life after death didn't believe that the afterlife would be physical. Today, it seems scientifically impossible that the dead could come back to life. But Paul swears that Jesus did rise from the grave.

Before we move on, I must stress how important it is to know that Christianity is based on historical truths. Some people tend to think religious beliefs aren't real. They tend to think that if those beliefs make you feel better, well, that's nice. But if Christianity isn't true, it doesn't matter if it makes you feel better. If it's not true, you will still die, and there will be no rescue for you. That would make Christian preachers evil, for they are giving false promises. It would be like telling cancer patients that everything will be alright as long as they take this pill, which is nothing more than a placebo. If Christianity isn't true, it's useless. If any religion isn't true, it's useless. But Paul states that Christianity is true, that it's the only way to be right with God. And I stand here telling you that same message.

Now, let's move on and read verses 20–26:

²⁰ But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. ²¹ For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. ²² For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. ²³ But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. ²⁴ Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. ²⁵ For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. ²⁶ The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

Paul says some amazing things here. First, he says that Jesus' resurrection is proof that everyone who trusts in him will rise from the dead. The "firstfruits" was the first portion of the crop. It was the promise that the rest of the crop was coming. Jesus' resurrected body was the

first installment of a new creation. It was the deposit, the down payment, the first installment of a new creation that God promises is coming. One day, God will remove all evil, decay, and death from the world.

Paul then says that death came into the world through Adam. Adam and Eve, the first human beings sinned. But Adam was the head, the representative of humanity, and he sinned. And because he sinned, God put a partial punishment on the world, including death. Now, you might not think it's fair that someone else would represent us the way Adam did. But we are represented by others, often by people we didn't choose. Many people didn't vote for our president, but he's still their president. I'm represented in Congress by people for whom I did not vote. And all of us inherit things, specifically our genes, from people we didn't choose to be our ancestors. Our first ancestor failed in the greatest way when he thought that he could be like God, and therefore didn't obey God's commandments. If we were in his place, we would have done the same, and we willingly sin against God. As a result, we all die.

So, Christianity tells us where we came from: God made people in his image, beginning with Adam and Eve. Christianity tells us what the purpose of life is, to know, love, worship, and obey God. Christianity also tells us what's wrong with the world: our sin, which introduced all the evil we see in the world. And Christianity tells us the solution to that problem.

Jesus came to undo death, to defeat *thanos*. The first part of that defeat was when Jesus rose from the grave. But the victory over death won't be completed until Jesus comes again. At that time, all who are united to Jesus by faith will be resurrected from the dead. Jesus will destroy every authority, every power that is opposed to God. Jesus is the King, and he will prevail. He will even destroy the last enemy—death itself. Death will die.

Now, many think that that's just wishful thinking. Atheists don't believe in a life after death. In fact, they don't believe that life has any meaning or purpose. Here's what Richard Dawkins, perhaps the most famous living atheist, once said:

In a universe of electrons and selfish genes, blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but pitiless indifference.³

³ Richard Dawkins, "God's Utility Function," *Scientific American* 273 (Nov. 1995): 85.

Another atheist, the British philosopher Bertrand Russell, believed that the world is “purposeless” and “void of meaning.”⁴ He says that we are “the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms,” that nothing “can preserve an individual life beyond the grave,” that “all the labors of the ages” and “the whole temple of man’s achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins.”⁵ In an equally cheery passage, Russell writes, “The life of man is a long march through the night, surrounded by invisible foes, tortured by weariness and pain One by one, as they march, our comrades vanish from our sight, seized by the silent orders of omnipotent death.”⁶

Now, you have to give credit to these atheists. At these moments, they have the courage to embrace the less pleasant aspects of a consistently-held atheistic worldview. If there is no God, you can’t say there’s any meaning to life, any prescribed purpose. In fact, as Dawkins admits, you can’t say that anything is good or evil. We’re here today and gone tomorrow, and all our achievements—in fact, all of humanity’s achievements—will be swallowed up in death.

However, there is a problem. One, the atheistic worldview can’t account for things that are very important to us, things like rationality and intelligence, purpose and meaning, love and human rights.⁷ Two, the atheistic worldview isn’t livable. Elsewhere in their writings, both Dawkins and Russell say that there is good and evil, and they assume that there are purposes in life. They’re cheating on their own worldview, and borrowing from a Christian worldview, or least a theistic worldview, to fill in the gaps of their own belief system.

So, atheism can’t give us hope. What other worldviews are there? Well, there are many. And some do give us the promise of eternal life. Other religions like Islam or Mormonism promise eternal life. But eternal life in these religions is based on your works. You earn salvation in those religions. And these religions say very different things about God and Jesus. Islam talks about Jesus, but it regards him only as a prophet, certainly not the Son of God. And according to the Qur’an, Jesus didn’t die on the cross. That means there’s no atonement, no one who paid the price for your sins. And it means there’s no resurrection, so how can we be sure that we will rise from the grave in the future if Jesus didn’t rise from the grave in the past? Mormonism has its

⁴ Bertrand Russell, “A Free Man’s Worship,” in *Why I Am Not a Christian and Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects* (New York: Touchstone, 1957), 106.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁷ For more on that subject, see Timothy Keller, *Making Sense of God: An Invitation to the Skeptical* (New York: Viking, 2016).

own unique beliefs, but it's basically a religion of works. And both have historical problems. There is no historical evidence to support that Jesus didn't die on the cross, and there is no historical evidence supporting the alleged ancient history that the Book of Mormon tells us about. And both religions were supposedly revealed to two men, who had private experiences of meeting an angel, or so they say. Christianity wasn't revealed to just one man. As Paul says, many people saw Jesus, both before and after his death and resurrection. The truth of Christianity is supported by public historical events witnessed by many people, and we have different streams of testimony by people who bore witness to what they had seen, heard, and even touched (1 John 1:1–4).

I think most people aren't atheists or Muslims or Mormons. I think most Americans are basically deists. A deist is someone who believes in a god who isn't too involved with the world and who doesn't place many demands on people. Over a decade ago, a couple of sociologists studied the religious beliefs of teenagers, and they concluded that most teens had a worldview that could be called "moralistic therapeutic deism." These sociologists, Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, summarized the beliefs of these teenagers in the following way:

1. A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.⁸

I think most Americans have that view of God and the world. But we must ask this question: who created that system of beliefs? Who says God is like that? That God places few demands on his creation. He's like a doting grandfather who gives his grandchildren a little money and says, "Now go and play, and be nice to each other."

The God described in that view is not the God of the Bible. The God of the Bible expects holiness and righteousness. Because he loves us, he wants the best for us, and because sin destroys us and the rest of his creation, God hates sin. It takes away from his glory and it ruins his creation. The Bible says that we can't fix the problem of sin or earn a right standing with

⁸ Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religions and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 162–163.

God. But God is merciful and gracious, and he has given us a way to be forgiven of our sin, to come back into a right relationship with him. That way is Jesus. Jesus is the only road that leads back to God and heaven. And we must follow that road, or we will remain in our sins, separated from God.

Salvation is offered freely. But once it is received, it changes one's life. As I said earlier, salvation is a process, and real faith is one that perseveres and lasts. Real faith leads people to do hard things in the name of Jesus. Paul certainly did that. He was beaten, imprisoned, and shipwrecked, among other things. About a decade or so after he wrote this letter, he would be executed in Rome. He knew that if Christianity is true, then we can suffer a little while now, because in eternity we will be in glory. But if Christianity is false, then live it up now, for then your life will be extinguished forever.

Let's look at verses 32–34

³² What do I gain if, humanly speaking, I fought with beasts at Ephesus? If the dead are not raised, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die."³³ Do not be deceived: "Bad company ruins good morals."³⁴ Wake up from your drunken stupor, as is right, and do not go on sinning. For some have no knowledge of God. I say this to your shame.

Paul wrote this letter in Ephesus, a significant city in the Roman Empire. And when he says he fought with beasts there, he's using a metaphor to say he suffered persecution there. Now, why would a person suffer for something unless he thought it was true? Clearly, Paul knew that he was suffering for the risen Christ, the one whom he had seen. If Christianity wasn't true, Paul would "eat and drink, for tomorrow we die." In other words, if there's no afterlife, just live it up now. Be selfish. Grab as much pleasure as you can. You only live once, so live large. Your best life is now. In fact, your only life is now.

But Paul knew that was false. He knew eternity was at stake. He knew there are two types of people: those who are associated with Adam, the first sinful man, the man of death, and those who are associated with Jesus, the God-man who gives life. Paul didn't want to see people condemned, cut off from God and all that is good. That's why he issues a warning here. He quotes a proverb of sorts, "Bad company ruins good morals." Be careful who you're hanging out with and what you do. If you're truly a Christian, now is the time to wake up and stop sinning. Some people who are in churches, some people who have been baptized and confirmed and all

the rest, have no knowledge of God. Their faith is in vain. It's empty. It's not real. And they're not going to be with Jesus forever. Now is the time to wake up, before it is too late.

And I say that to all who are here. Do you know what will happen to you after death? How certain are you? Most people avoid thinking about death, which is a shame, because death will come. Perhaps death is too much to bear, so people avoid thinking about it. I think most people truly want to live forever. Last week, the news of a fire at Notre-Dame in Paris shocked and dismayed many people. Part of that is because the building is a priceless, historical treasure. But I think part of that response is because we assume that some things will be around forever. But the reality is that death will swallow up everything.

However, the good news is that God will destroy death. Christianity gives us amazing promises. Look at verse 53–57:

⁵³ For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. ⁵⁴ When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written:

“Death is swallowed up in victory.”
⁵⁵ “O death, where is your victory?
O death, where is your sting?”

⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. ⁵⁷ But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

These great truths inspired John Donne to write the following lines:

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so
One short sleep past, we wake eternally
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.

Don't you get a sense of how amazing this is? Don't you want this to be true? Don't you ache for a day when death has no power? Don't you want your lives to have meaning and purpose? Don't you long for death to be destroyed? Don't you long for a perfect peace that never ends? God himself is that peace, and he has made a way for us to be at peace. That way is Jesus.

Now is the time to wake from our slumbers, to think about the meaning of life and death. Don't hear this message and shrug your shoulders. Spend some time looking at the evidence for Christianity. I would love to help you learn more about the Bible and why we should trust that its contents are true. I urge you to turn to Jesus, the God-man, the conqueror of death, and live.

And Christian, know for certain that you will experience that glory. You will receive a body that will never die. But in the meantime, work hard for Jesus. Don't be like everyone else who says, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die." Say, "Let us work hard now, for in eternity we will rest." Look at the last verse of 1 Corinthians:

⁵⁸Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.